

*Sven Mørch*

# Learning to Become Youth

## An Action Theory Approach

### Summary

Youth is a historical construction and an answer to a specific challenge of individualisation in biography. And, as a historical and social construction, youth has to be learned. This article focuses on youth development from an action or activity theory perspective and as a learning process. It demonstrates how different youth problems and forms of youth differentiation follow forms of youth learning. Moreover, it shows how late modern development creates the demand for a new non-formal learning perspective to secure the development of new forms of competence. Based on Danish research concerning peer learning as a non-formal learning context, some perspectives of peer-learning competence are discussed.

Youth development is a constant individual and social challenge. Young people are on the road to a life in society, and this creates anxiety at many levels within society. Therefore, the understanding and socialisation of youth have always been considered very important (Gillis 1981, Mørch 1985, Stafsgeng 1996).

It was not so many years ago that the socialisation of youth was a normative, and perhaps also violent, process of adaptation to adult demands, a process that took place particularly in school. The “youth revolt” and social criticism of the 1960s changed this adaptive perspective and made youth autonomy and individual psychological development the most important issues. Youth became a more valued

phenomenon and the psychological development of youth and youth identity became the central issue. As Marcuse (1964) points out in his ‘One dimensional Man’, students (young people) should be the vanguard of a new society.

Today, this view seems to have changed. The picture of youth has become more complicated. In some situations, youth identity development is still the focus, but in broad social-political discussions, youth societal engagement and competence seem to have overpowered the interest in autonomy and identity in youth.

Youth development today pertains to most young people in Western Societies. Individualisation is still the basic developmental demand, but individualisation is part of a constantly changing society. Today, individualisation is not just about being an adult, or the acquisition of qualifications for participating in the work force, it is also about the challenge of becoming “a late modern individual”. This involves both the development of ‘agency’ and becoming a knowledgeable and reflective subject who is able to take part in social development. Youth development therefore is not only an issue of psychological adolescence, it is also a learning challenge. In addition, more types of learning practice are involved in the individualisation of young people.

Therefore, social psychology with its focus on individualisation and social integration has become an important scientific frame for understanding youth development.

The challenge of understanding the double perspective of social integration and individualisation however is not always visible in social psychology. The question therefore seems to be what sort of theory, and perhaps what social psychological theory, is necessary for understanding individualisation and youth development today. In this article, I suggest that new developments in action and activity theory offer some answers to these questions.<sup>1</sup>

## Individualisation and activity theory

The challenges of individualisation and social integration of course can be seen from different perspectives. On the one hand, there is a psychological perspective, which considers individual development to be a mostly psychological or biological process occurring inside the individual, but on the other hand, sociological science for the most part considers individualisation to be the result of societal demands and processes. Youth theory and social psychology, therefore, in many ways have been inspired by both psychology and sociology, and combinations of psychology and sociology have developed within a social psychological reference. Psychology becomes more social and aware of group influence, and sociology examines the micro-social processes. However, the bridging between these two perspectives has become a central interdisciplinary challenge (Still 1998).

If psychology and sociology are standing

at each end of a bridge and are trying to be aware of what is happening at the other end, activity theory places itself in the middle of the bridge and tries to find ways to develop a double vision that can include both ends of the bridge at the same time. It has tried to change its perspective from being dualistic to understanding processes of duality (Giddens 1984).

However, in this situation, it seems as if the 'bridging' is difficult. Parsonian action theory has a solid sociological basis (Parsons 1951, Alexander 1987, Mills 1959, Mørch 1994) and Leontjev activity perspective mostly considers the psychological processes (Leontjev 1983). Furthermore, Critical Psychology has a psychological position (Holzkamp 1983) and many new constructionist theories solve the bridging problem by making the individual a psychological actor and discursive agent with only societal constraints (Gergen 1997, Potter & Wetherell 1987).

Perhaps the turning point in the development of action and activity theory is when the perspective changes from looking at the active – and also discursive – individual to *focusing on the individual activity itself*: this turn perhaps is the most interesting aspect of Giddens' work. In "The Constitution of Society", Giddens (1984) is inspired by Parsons' understanding of "unit acts", but he criticises Parsons' action theory as being too normative. Instead, he highlights activities as acts of structuration in which the individual makes a difference in society (Mørch 1994).

The bridging between individual and society in this way is made an issue of activity. Activity, in its broad sense as acts, thoughts and emotions, belongs both to society and the individual. Activities, as personal and social at the same time, are the motors of the individualisation process. Therefore, individualisation as such is not a late modern phenomenon. Individualisation has always taken place, but its forms have varied over time. Thus, it is impor-

<sup>1</sup> Action theory and activity theory have different roots. A sociological (Parsons) or a psychological (Leontjev). However, today they influence each other in the understanding of the individual as both an actor and a subject. In this article the two approaches are combined in my perspective of a social psychological activity theory

tant to develop an activity theory perspective that shows the difference between the modern and late modern individualisation challenge and youth development.

## An activity theory perspective

The main issue of action and activity theory is often seen as acknowledging human activity as intentional. According to Parsonian theory, people act 'normatively intentional' (Layder 1994), according to ethnomethodological theory, people act 'contextually intentional' (Heritage 1987), and in Giddens' theory, people are intentional in 'making a difference' (Giddens 1984). An awareness that people act intentionally, however, is not the only central aspect of an activity theory that tries to form a bridge between sociology and psychology. Rather, an activity theory should focus on activities as people's intentional engagement in social challenges in individual lives. This view concerning human intentionality of course should be at the centre of an activity theory, but activity should not be isolated from its social contexts and embeddedness in social relations. Activity points to a mixture of thinking, feeling and acting in demanding social contexts.

This active use of societal, social and individual conditions in the development of intentional activity is more understandable when we look at an example. If we are standing outside an open window to a 9<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, we might observe that the students are speaking English. Then the bell rings. The students rise and leave the classroom. Ten minutes later, the bell rings again and the students come back, sit down and start speaking German. This change in their behaviour is mostly non-understandable from a psychological point of view. But, it is quite simple to understand if we look at the behaviour as activity. To start, the students had an English lesson and then a German lesson. Moreover, what the students are doing is acting both according to the school demands

in English and German and to their own facility with language. They act within a context or situation that presents them with a task or challenge.

On the one hand, the individual uses societal conditions or acts within conditions as possibilities and constraints of action. Conditions, then, should be seen as both rules and resources of action. Conditions as historically developed possibilities and constraints of human activity are often contradictory and diffuse. For this reason, the individual both uses and changes societal conditions in his activity. Societal conditions exist in social contexts. They are organised within social contexts and organise social contexts, for example, in the case of the school system and school curriculum. School, as a social context of youth, exhibits contradictory possibilities and constraints of learning and youth life, but at the same time, youth is part of the process of changing the school.

On the other hand, the individual uses his/her own previous experiences and personal capacities as his/her individual tools or conditions for action. In the actualisation of societal conditions, the individual uses him- or herself and actualises his/her own potentialities in the situation and according to the conditions of the situation. Through this process, the individual develops further capacities, and also self-awareness, self-understanding or a personal identity, which may work as a force or as a restriction in later activities (Andersen & Mørch 2005).

In actualisation, the individual's understanding of societal, social and individual conditions plays an important role. The particular conditions the individual finds important in the specific situation are crucial to the mastering of actual problems or tasks, and the conditions the individual finds important in understanding his or her own life are important to the engagement in actualisation. Nevertheless, the understanding of being a group member and

part of a social context influences the activity. Therefore, knowledge and knowledgeable, a sort of sense-making, both about social life and oneself, are very important qualities in human life and also a challenge to everyday coping.

The development of activities, knowledgeability and self-understanding takes place in the social relationship in the context. Social relations and interaction are crucial in actualisation. In this way, social relations are important for understanding individual activity. Youth cultures, for example, should be seen as representing common forms of activity patterns. Youth cultures are activities made by youngsters in mastering youth-life. Therefore, cultures are both activities and values of activity.

The broad idea of activity theory can be summed up like this:

Individual activity is reflective actualisation of societal and individual conditions within a space or context. Therefore, the individual understanding of conditions, the way they are made meaningful to the individual, is important. The context is social and involves more individuals and becomes influential in the sensemaking of conditions and in the construction of the individual trajectory<sup>2</sup>. The individ-

ual participates in developing the activities in the context or space and is at the same time a 'user' of the activities, which already exist in the space. In this way, "structuration" becomes an important aspect of individual activity.

So, individualisation is a construction process that both depends on and develops structures and organisations. At the same time, this model emphasises that individuals are not looking for identity as a developmental goal in particular. They are trying to take part in and manage challenges of everyday life. And, if they develop self-identity in this process it seems fine. They have to find out what they are capable of doing (Andersen & Mørch 2005).

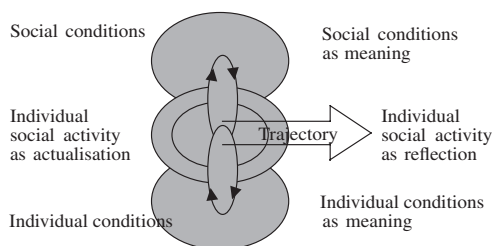
This activity theory of course refers to all social activities, but for understanding youth development the model seems in particular quite helpful. Youth development is about individualisation and it takes place in specific constructed contexts.

## An analytical youth model: Individualisation and biography

As already mentioned, the construction of youth is part of a historical and societal individualisation developmental process (Mørch 1985). Therefore, it is possible to draw an analytical model of youth development. The drawing has two dimensions. On the one hand, youth is a social construction that deals with the issue of social integration by focusing on the individualisation process. On the other hand, youth individualisation also happens as a biographical process, a psychological development during which children are changed into adults.

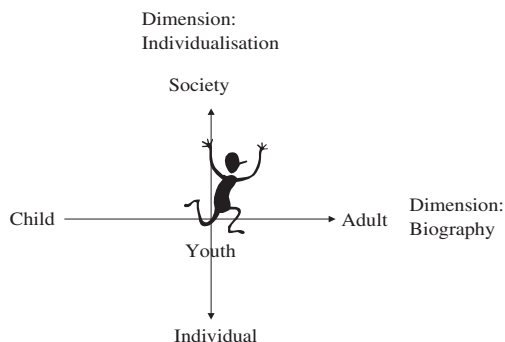
Both of these dimensions point to challenges that the individual faces: to become integrated as an individual and to use and develop a biography. Therefore, we can make a general theory of youth: *Youth is about the social integrative challenge of individualisation in biography* (Mørch 2003).

Fig. 1: The general activity theory



2 The concept of trajectory refers to the path people take in different situations, also as a life story. It comes from ballistics and is used by Asplund (1983). An interesting perspective is that tracks can be seen as existing before they are used. The trajectory concept points to the construction of the trajectory in activity.

Fig. 2: Youth theoretical dimensions



This perspective makes it obvious that the creation, construction and challenges of youth are dependent on the changes along the two dimensions, and how they change over time and how they may correspond or be in conflict with each other. Youth as an individual or perhaps psychological quality is always a result of changing social or societal challenges. These two dimensions are not static. The process of social integration changes with the changing of societal production and political reorganisation, as it is discussed in post- or late-modern literature. Further, biography or life history also changes historically with the changing of family life and institutional arrangements (Mørch & Andersen 2005).

## Changing dimensions of individualisation

The analytic value of the perspective of ‘integration in biography’ becomes clear when we glimpse briefly at the development of the two dimensions of integration and biography and the relation between them.

From its start in late 18<sup>th</sup> century until the Second World War, we refer to the modern society, which in particular was the time period for the construction and spreading of individualisation as an educational process. The following “late or post modernity”, or simply called “modernity”, mostly refers to the

developments occurring from the 1950s and 1960s and is also called the development of the post-industrial, the learning society or the information society etc. All these concepts highlight different aspects of the changing societal basis of modernity, but at the same time they all point to new learning challenges for the individual.

Most literature of this period seems to be exactly about individualisation and modernisation. Both post-modern theory and late-modern theories focus on the changes in society and in individual life that have taken place since the 1960s (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Baumann 2000).

Individualisation in modernity prepares the individual for the challenge of actively participating in social contexts. For Giddens (1991), self-reflection and structuration are important aspects of modernity. Giddens’ analysis points to late modern challenges and as such they can be used to highlight general demands of competencies for the individualisation development in late modern life:

- *Self-identity*
- *Reflexivity*
- *Self-assurance*
- *Knowledgeability*
- *Individual basic trust of the world and one-self*
- *Participation*

These requirements of the late modern society describe the general aspects of individual competencies in relation to an overall late modern social integration perspective. They refer to our understanding of individual or personal competence. Moreover, they seem to point clearly to the general goals of education today: not only to learn, but to develop a modern personality. Therefore, these requirements become important in the process of constructing one-self as a winner or loser in modernity. Young people, e.g., those who have very



high self-assurance with only a low degree of knowledge, will have minimal success in education and in the labour market. Therefore, Giddens' list points to single items, which are part of a general late-modern structure.

## The changing biography

It should also be noted that biography is continuously changing. If we look back in time, we can see that the construction of youth in the bourgeoisie changed the pre-existing 'traditional biography' into an institutional biography. Children and young people were educated or 'developed' in different social contexts by answering the demands of these contexts and by following the repertoire of the contexts. From the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, school/education was supplemented by social arrangements, such as youth clubs, sports clubs, scouts etc. And from around the 1950s, the peer group or youth culture developed as a social reference for young people, often influenced by music and media. Youth individualisation in its changing form was constructed inside the institutional processes of biography. Thus, the most general picture of youth trajectories and individualisation was drawn as a transition phase between childhood and adulthood.

What we might experience today is the result of a change in the youth trajectory. Thus, youth-life is prolonged: it starts early and ends late in life. Or, it never ends. One might even suggest that there is a "disappearance of adulthood" (Côté 2000). This development follows the popularity of youth and being young. On the one hand, youth life and being – and looking – young has become so popular that children want to become youth or teenagers very early. This tendency is supported not only by media, but parents and other adults also create youth in children or early "youthhood" by dress and lifestyle (Frønes & Brusdal 2000). This process is quite important concerning

the content of children's lives. Adults have always liked to dress children as adults (Aries 1962), but when youth becomes the popular developmental goal, this also influences children. Children today are dressed as youth. They should become youth very early in life. On the other hand, it is also popular to stay young. Youth lifestyles, fashions and sexual behaviour have become the popular goal for all. Nobody wants to become an adult. Therefore, job or work situations are under pressure as well. Jobs should be entertaining, secure development and be 'sexy'.

The broadening of youth life and values to all parts of life changes the idea of youth as "transition" time. Individualisation demands are not only challenging young people but all people in late modernity. Today late modern values and practices exist everywhere and dissolve all existing structures, such as cultural and age structures. Instead of specific stages of life, we are confronted in the modern Western world with new circumstances of 'fragmented contextualisation': the demands in late modern society exist everywhere and are parts of every social context. If all differences between being a child, a youth and an adult more or less disappear, we will all live in the same general social contexts. And here, more specific contexts are functioning as a network producing different aspects of development (Mørch 1999). This makes the trajectory a new sort of choice biography, but not in the sense that individuals may choose between being young or adult. Rather, they have to choose between different contexts and contextual demands, which are all formed and influenced by values of late modern society. Moreover, they also have to arrange and combine for themselves the different contexts in their own lives. They have to develop individual or personal trajectories through different social contexts.

Today, therefore, social integration and individualisation no longer point to one major trajectory or normal trajectories between child-

hood and adult life. Many more routes or pathways may exist and become trajectories inside and between different or fragmented social contexts. Thus, different forms of youth life may develop. Young adults do not have to become ‘adults’. They can choose a specific lifestyle that combines modern consumer and educational lifestyles.

In a ‘fragmented contextualisation’ situation, some contexts may be ‘reserved’ for specific age groups and formed according to their interests. It is still possible for outsiders to observe youth life and for young people to see themselves as living a youth life. Youth still exists as an objective and subjective social category. But other ‘contextual reservations’ appear as well, including ethnic, educational, sport etc. And the new rooms of modernity may be very exclusive, with gatekeepers to sort people who are entering.

In this situation, the real trajectory challenge falls back upon the individual. Individuals form their own trajectories and in this way contextualise aspects of development in their biographies by combining societal conditions and individual interests. Therefore, in our fragmented society, the first trajectory challenge for young people is not merely to participate, but to find out in what they should participate and for what reason. This makes the knowledge and educational engagement an option for young people; maybe not so much because it guarantees the future, but for its value in a late modern youth life.

## Individualisation in biography

In late modern youth life, young people have a new responsibility for making their own trajectories. Therefore, the second new challenge for young people seems to be ‘the construction of sense and competence’ for manoeuvring in a more open world. Young people should learn to ‘cope’ or they should develop forms of ‘expedient’ life management (Mørch &

Laursen 1998). Expediency however is not easy to develop if the challenges are multiple and unclear.

One challenge of fragmented and ‘indirect’ youth life seems to be to construct individual skills for the job market or ‘transversal’ competence – the kind of competence that can be used in working life too. But with adulthood disappearing, and therefore without adult guidelines and job perspectives, it is often difficult to see connections between educational activities and later job opportunities, and therefore an individual planning perspective can become blurred.

If young people engage themselves in formal educational trajectories, they can not be sure that they will lead to interesting jobs, and if they engage in and learn from non-educational contexts of modern youth life and reject the ‘irrelevance’ of formal education, they may gain new competence, but they may also lose their connection to jobs and the future. Individual trajectories may become too ‘private’. The problem of a ‘choice trajectory’ is that people can make the wrong choices.

Further, our broad, common youth and media culture, which involves all young people, at the same time has a hidden agenda, of which not all young people are aware. At the same time, because youth life should be fun, a competition for the future exists underneath the shared youth culture. Youth and educational life in themselves differentiate young people according to future life perspectives. They create leading and misleading trajectories, but inside youth-life, it is difficult to see which are leading somewhere and which are not.

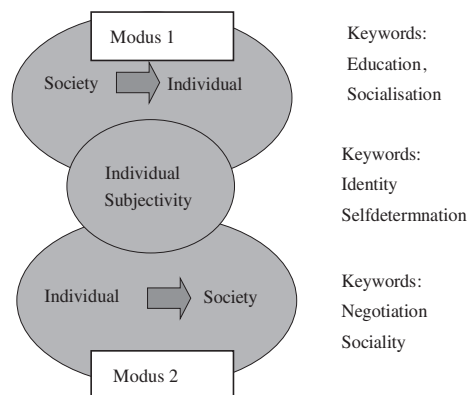
The great challenge in modern ‘fragmented contextual’ youth life, on the one hand, seems to be the ability to manoeuvre oneself in-between different contexts and demands and engage in the “right” contexts, but on the other hand, the demand also seems to be to construct one’s own trajectory. Giddens’

concept of *structuration* can be seen as capturing this challenge: both to learn to use structures and to make new structures all the time. But the structuration concept perhaps should be supplemented by a concept of “competence-ation”. For young people, the overall demand is not only to develop structures, but also to develop competencies for their own lives; both as competencies for social life in a broad sense, but also as a sort of employability, that is, being able to grasp work opportunities (Mørch & Stalder 2003).

## The new integration mode

Late modern individualisation theory can be used to sum up these broad changes in youth life and individualisation. Most theory about late modern society suggests that individualisation is not necessarily increasing, rather it is changing. Therefore, we can discern at least two different modes of individualisation. In the last two hundred years, socialisation agencies such as families and school systems have been engaged in a special development of individualisation, firstly as a development in the bourgeoisie and since then as a broadening of individualisation extended to all young people (“Modus 1”, fig. 3). The result of this individualisation process was the growing attention to individual identity and subjectivity in the 1960s and 1970s. In the new or contemporary situation, it seems as if individualisation is not seen as a result of education or socialisation. Rather, it is something that already exists within the individual that should be nursed and negotiated. Individuals are seen as actors in late modern society, and as such, they are taken as individuals before they engage in education and social life (“Modus 2”, fig. 3). Therefore, the new challenge is not to create an individual – Modus 1- nor blindly support the individual, but to influence individuals in the making of society and new forms of social integration (Andersen & Mørch 2005).

Fig. 3: From modern to late modern individualisation



Today, both modes of individualisation exist, but Modus 2 challenges Modus 1. Young people are not only the result of socialisation in education, they have become partners in the structuration of modern life (negotiation). They have become ‘subjects’ in society, and very often most are aware of their new status. Further, the difficulties in creating social responsibility are experienced more broadly in everyday life. All people – and maybe especially young people – see the world from their own perspectives, as worlds-of-their-own, and often it looks as if individualisation has a tendency to create a very private perspective, a ‘What’s in it for me – thinking’ (Ziehe 2001), or ‘this is *my* decision- argument’.

The educational system especially is caught in this challenge of individualisation in late modern society. It should secure both the broad societal interests in the development of social responsibility and support the individual subjectivity as the prerequisite of activity. The solutions to this challenge go in many directions.

One solution is that children and young persons must solve the problems themselves. They have to develop their own trajectories. As Bauman (2000) suggests, societal problems today should be solved in individual biography. It is



in the interest of the individual him- or herself to find a way into society, both to have an education and later on a job. This new, liberal perspective has become popular in educational planning. Young people should make their own choices. But this answer may also create problems. If young people only look at their own or private interests, only look for what 'I can get out of it', the individual result can be in opposition to more overall long-term interests of the individual and societal necessities. More regulations in everyday life as well as a strong police department will be necessary to secure societal interests. And this is exactly what seems to be happening. The number of police and security personnel is sharply increasing in most late modern societies.

Another solution to the challenge of individualisation comes from new forms of social integration in modernity. And here, the change from a production-based to a consumer-based society becomes understandable. The consumer society makes consume itself the new means of control. Individuals are free to choose, but at the same time they are guided by advertising – and in this way “societal” interests. Societal interests as consumer interests however are contradictory. Business interests sometimes contradict general societal interests and make consumer protection popular and a new issue of television and media interest. However, modern individualisation has become an issue of individual development inside a new consumer paradigm of social integration.

Especially for youth, the consumer model has become very important. Young people are the super-consumers of modernity. They are the target of most advertisements, and advertisement and media play a central role in the formation and development of today's youth cultures and everyday lives. The media guides their development of subjectivity. They are youth and society consumers.

Even educational life has become part of this consumer development. Education has de-

veloped into a commodity and takes the form of a commodity by differentiating educational opportunities in response to the competition for customers. Educational structures themselves make the student an education consumer.

But consumerism also creates differences. Even though it may seem as if consuming connects all people, consuming develops different life styles and also societal groupings.

## Engagement or cleverness: The educational challenge

The creation of losers and winners of modernity is a manifold process, but it is especially about the quality of individualisation. Many young people are not able to use or are not invited into the conditions of individualisation in late modern society. There is a resulting 'relative de-individualisation', which means that the individualisation process does not provide the competencies that are needed for taking advantage of the opportunities that generally exist today (Mørch 1991).

In individualisation, the role of education is most important. Schooling and education can be seen as plans or trajectories that young people can choose. But very often, educational plans are plans for the organisation of the educational institutions and are not very helpful for the students. Consequently, it is a challenge for young people to engage in or become part of the educational plans. Often, education does not develop activities in which it is possible to engage.

If we examine the educational models in Denmark and choose to see education as plans of development, the relation between social class and individualisation becomes very clear. In Denmark, there have been three overall models of education. The educational model from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a class divided school system. The school gate sorted children according to social class. School was originally

not intended for all young people, only for bourgeois youth. And when children started in school, it was expected that they had learned the basics, such as reading and arithmetic, before they started school. School was created as a place for learning to be youth and therefore it was only open to the upper bourgeois classes (Mørch 1985).

From the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a public school system slowly developed. By the middle of the 1950s, all children in Denmark were placed in a school system that differentiated the children according to abstract qualification demands in the curricula. It also favoured social class reproduction, not by its form, but by its content. Children with educated or rich parents did better in school. In this situation, youth became an opportunity for the upper class children and other extremely talented children.

Since the 1970s, a new school plan or school system called 'equality through education' has been used. In this educational system, a child's social background should not influence his/her success in school. Learning should be differentiated according to the individual child and the child him/herself is responsible for his/her own learning. Trajectories should be constructed, not overtaken.

This system of course attacks social class inequality by placing all kids in the same school system, but it does not stop differentiation. Social background and future life are not the same. In late modern life, social classes are dissolved and social placement is seen as following a middle-class or individual perspective. Today, differentiation takes place inside the school or educational system and is based on individual performance. And, individual performance is of course still dependent on having help and support from parents and friends and having perspectives related to the future. In the modern school system of 'equality through education', social inequality is formally dissolved and replaced by individ-

ual differentiation. But, individual differentiation still reproduces social differences (Hansen 1995, 1997).

However, the Danish late modern school system provides great opportunities for all and creates youth for all young people. Most school research agrees that around 80 percent of students to a varying degree find school life acceptable and the teachers alright. But, this means that for around 20 percent, school life is not for them. They can not find engagement in school life.

This group is in danger of developing relative de-individualisation. Often, they have no hope for the future; they do not trust the future.

This development is well illustrated in research concerning Danish children. The children with the most problems are often school dropouts who are not able to develop life-perspectives. Or maybe they experience modernity as a crisis that makes them unable to engage in anything. In a research project focusing on one of the problem areas in Denmark, Volsmose, the girls, who become girl-friends with some 'problem – immigrant' young boys often tell a story of giving up school, but also a story of some sort of crisis. (Bouchet 1999) They become relatively de-individualised. They draw back from developing their lives and instead they often engage in social conflicts. Like the Milltown children in Howard Williamson's study (Williamson 1997), they may be more or less clever in managing everyday life, but they will be losers of late modernity.

In this situation, youth becomes an option for all, but the "quality" of the youth's life may vary according to school success.

## Differentiation in modernity

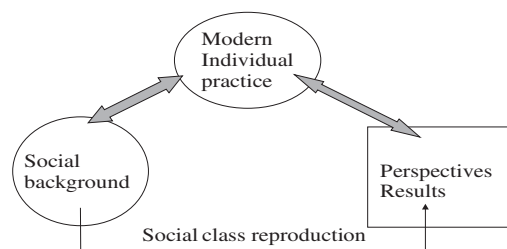
In the change from a class society structure to a late modern individualised society, one of the differences is that class is taking a new role. In the former class society, young people

were more or less products of their social class backgrounds, suggesting a social class reproduction. Children and young people could follow class lines or fight to overcome them. And the way to overcome social class dependency was to change tracks or trajectories, as when working class children were put in middle class trajectories, as in 'Learning to labour' (Willis 1977). But in late modern individualised society, young people themselves have to make their own trajectories. The point of modernistic life is simply that in late modernity, individuals have to be able to develop goals or perspectives for their lives, learn different practices and get help from their social backgrounds.

In a general way, this explains the logic of differentiation in modernity. Before, social class reproduction was occurring. Today, individual youth practice or youth activity creates the individual youths and their life perspectives. But, not all youth are in the same situation. Those who are able to develop 'youth capital' in school and education are able to develop perspectives for their lives. And those who can get help from their social networks will have better chances for developing expedient trajectories. But those who need support and friends are in trouble. Thus, social class no longer 'automatically' produces young people. However, young people use or draw upon social class and therefore are dependent on it, whether there is something to draw on or not.

From this position, it becomes clear that

Fig. 4: Social class or individualised society



young people of late modernity are facing a challenge. Regardless of what it means more precisely, they all have to learn to become 'late modern' or be able to meet the challenges of our late modern world. They all have to learn to live in a contextually differentiated world; to use the contexts and find trajectories in between the different contexts.

## The role of Peer education in learning

In our late modern world, it is all about learning. Youth development is about learning youth. The question is, however, should learning be changed in this modernisation process. Learning youth should not only be seen as a process taking place inside school and educational systems, it is a broader process of learning in late modernity.

What we experience today is that, besides changes in formal school and educational contexts, learning also seems to be going in new directions. Learning in educational contexts is supported or supplemented by non-formal learning in new youth contexts.

The growing interest in non-formal learning today seems to point to a new situation and also to alternative ways of learning to be modern. Development today is not only about developing qualifications in school and identity in the informal social family life, but also about developing broad competence. And it appears that non-formal learning has become an important player in this new game, often in the form of peer education or peer learning.

## A case of learning in late modern society: Peer education and peer learning

Peer education is often thought of as planned, but non-formal learning through the use of peer relations. This position, however, seems to be too narrow to describe the broad perspec-

tives and possibilities that exist when using peer education.

In a study of the development of Danish and Nordic peer education (Laursen & Mørch 1998), it was shown that Scandinavian experiences indicate a broad use of peer education as a special form of non-formal learning. Peer education should not only be seen as a technique for educating youngsters, but also as a way of making young people active participants in their own youth life. If peer education becomes the activity of young people themselves, it may lead to engagement, participation and to the development of social responsibility for the development of modern youth life.

However, to show how peer education may be a “learning perspective” or a pedagogic tool of modernity, it is important to describe briefly its forms and development.

## The basic perspectives of peer education

If we focus on the central ideas of peer education, two quite different aspects appear: the use of peers and the perspectives of education.

### *The peers*

One central aspect of peer education is its idea of using peer relations or group relations as a means for behavioural change. The social context of the peer group is used to make young people listen to and open up to information.

This interest in “social learning” in youth work, of course, is an old issue dating back to the scout movement at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the specific focus on friends and social relations as “peers” seems to have been inspired by group psychology and the development of the study of peer groups in the 1950s, where the peer group and its influence on the individual youngster became the focus.

In ‘peer group’ theory, however, the peer group is often seen as dangerous and peer

group influence is seen as “bad influence”. The idea of peer education today seems to turn this perspective around. Today, peers should not be seen only as bad friends, rather, the power of the peer group should be *cultivated* and be made a positive factor in youth life. This is in accordance with the role of peers in late modern socialisation practices and also school life (Andersen & Mørch 2005). From this perspective, the idea of the peer group as providing some sort of “positive social context of development” is not very far. Today, it seems that peers are considered important and not considered to be only “social facilitators”, but much more as parts of social contexts.

### *The idea of education*

The focus on peers as a “reference group” or the social context of youth life understanding and development also changes the idea of education.

In modern peer education, education can be seen in its ordinary perspective as either “socialisation” or as someone teaching someone else. However, a broader learning perspective has become important as well, and especially non-formal learning or contextual or situational learning has become central (Lave & Wenger 1991). In this context, not only peers themselves should be engaged in the learning process, but they should learn from each other as well.

However, some differences exist in the understanding and use of peer education. In an English context, when we refer to peer education we focus on activities in which peers are used in training or informal learning. In these situations, peer education may be seen as a method for developing expedient behaviour or skills and attitudes in the individuals. Peer education has some sort of open or hidden “educational” agenda and is seen as a strong measure of socialisation.

In the Danish version, we do not talk about “education”, but only about young people

learning from each other. Instead of peer education, we may therefore talk about *peer learning*. In this situation, fixed goals for peer learning are non-existent, goals are open for debate. Therefore, they have to be formulated in the development of the process. There seems to be a change from “Modus 1” to “Modus 2” in the shift from peer education to peer learning. To understand the consequence of this development, we can examine our research regarding Danish peer learning activities.

Danish peer learning activities are formed around specific issues. In our research, we found that a wider variety of more different peer learning activities have developed (Mørch & Laursen 1991). Some peer learning activities are very similar to *peer education*. Here, some “information” or “informal education” (socialisation) occurs that teaches young people to stop smoking, have safe sex (if they have sex), drink less etc. Other activities teach youngsters to function democratically in different contexts. Young people were involved in democratic decision making for the learning of democratic behaviour. But, other peer learning activities focus directly on “youth life understanding”. In this case, young people themselves engage other young people in discussions and reflections concerning the challenges of modern youth life and how modern youth life challenges might be solved. This situation suggests a model of *peer learning* of modernity.

However, in all their different forms, including the more traditional activities, Danish peer learning-methods have advanced by developing a “universe of discourse”, a process of sense making of late modern youth life. This discourse either helps to develop individual self-understanding and individual practices, a broader common understanding, a youth culture, which could be used to help the individual to understand modern youth life and the possibilities and restrictions contained in it.

It is interesting to note that in our research,

the young people engaged in discussions of the goals of the “peer activities”, concerning all types of activities. The goals themselves developed during a discussion of the perspective of late modern youth life, or during some sort of practical negotiation of youth life and youth life perspectives. Peer learning activities not only established an educational and/or training situation for young people, it also seemed to make youth life itself an issue of debate. The fragmented contextualisation of youth development became a discursive issue among the youngsters. And in this way, young people became active in the process of structuration, “making sense” and in forming and changing different youth life styles.

For example, in the safe-sex campaigns formed as part of HIV education, the young people not only learned how to use condoms, they discussed and “developed” ideas about ways in which “safe sex” could become a natural life-style among youngsters. Further, the project “*Stop volden*” (Stop violence) was a youth activity or peer learning project. It engaged young people by reflecting on modern youth life challenges and developing ways to manage conflicts in non-violent ways. In both cases, the activities focused on the challenge of managing modern youth life.

In particular, the “Danish model” of non-formal learning made it necessary for the participants to find and develop their own understanding of possible goals and means in late modern youth life. The Danish model can be seen as a “best practice” of non-formal learning.

## Peer learning and individualisation

Through an examination of peer education/peer learning, it becomes apparent that the issue at stake is not simply how to influence young people. It is a method for young people themselves to develop a further understanding



of modern youth life and their own place and perspectives inside this.

The role non-formal peer learning plays is to help late modern individualisation in youth life. The value of this becomes clear when we focus on a more general model of individual development. The model was developed to overcome the often very narrow perspectives of youth development as identity development that is popular in youth research. The point of the model (fig. 5) is to show that individual development is comprised of, at least, three different aspects: “Being”, “Knowing” and “Doing”. Therefore, individual development should respond to all of these different developmental aspects.

And though all dimensions are important, they may have different importance at different times in individual lives. Moreover, they highlight different institutional activities.

Today, it seems as if the “doing” perspective is the driving developmental perspective in youth life and for youngsters themselves. Young people have to be and want to be competent for managing new challenges of future life. Thus, the “reading” of youth life is an important aspect of being competent and developing subjectivity. Competence, among other things, also includes the ability to find and organise the “meaning” in situations. So, instead of just following “knowledge curricula”,

young people often have to develop their own biographical trajectories.

In this situation, non-formal learning and peer learning seem to be important conditions. Competence, of course, demands qualifications and self-identity, but the engagement in “understanding” and making modernity challenges “do-able” seem to be important for the engagement and success of youth learning activities.

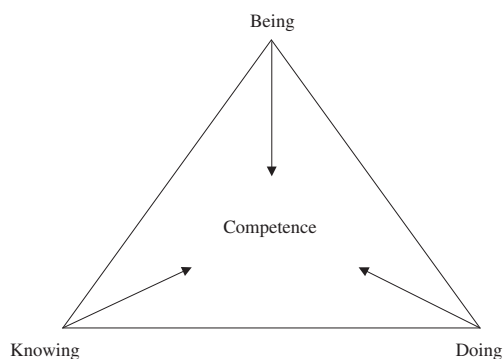
### *The problem of expediency*

One basic question in this developmental discussion is how the modern individualisation process works; how does the ‘Modus 2’ development from being an individual to becoming a socially responsible actor function. This is the question of expediency: does the individual activities both help individualisation and social integration.

The question of expediency points to a central issue in peer education: how should “we” make sure that “they” will make good choices, *or how should the problem of social integration be solved at the individual level.*

To be sure that late modern youth life functions within the challenge of social integration, it seems important to point to the challenge of developing in youth life generally a universe of “democratic influence” and “competence”, which makes young people competent actors of modernity. And this demands the existence of certain social conditions (education and work) for successful social integration in late modernity. Many youth groups do not integrate their members. In essence, the problems of group influence exist if the relation between formal and non-formal education does not function. Youth groups that are seen as problematic often consist of young people who have experienced defeat in school. This highlights the importance of a necessary, close relation between formal and non-formal education.

Fig. 5: A developmental theory



## Challenges in peer education/peer learning practice

When we examine peer education in relation to its potential for developing “expedient” behaviour in young people, we should be aware of some of the contradictions that exist in peer education.

If peer education is simply seen as “informal teaching” by the use of peers in the process, its objective is seen as developing new and maybe expedient skills and attitudes. This seems both necessary and practical. However, this situation may create a “manipulation” of young people. As such, it is in opposition to the demands of modern youth and modern young people themselves, ideologically, because it does not accept the autonomy of young people and, practically, because young people might reject such forms of authoritative decisions in their youth life. They may feel it to be an “adult campaign” and therefore it might have the opposite result.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, it seems necessary to engage young people in issues that are broader than their practical everyday life. Young people should be given conditions for engagement and development of “common culture” that might stress responsibility in youth behaviour.

Returning to the activity theory perspective, it seems obvious that the challenge of “actualisation” of social and individual conditions calls for useful conditions, both social and individual, but it also calls for a reflection on and development of processes of sense-making. This development needs support from (formal) educational life and informal learning.

Activity theory therefore may help to clarify that it is not only societal or individual perspectives that can uncover what is important for understanding youth development. The

activity-bridging perspective sharpens our attention to the activities of youth life and asks questions as to what conditions are needed for the development of individualisation in youth life in late modern society.

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3 This seems to have been the case in Denmark with anti-smoking campaigns. There was an increase in smoking among youngsters.

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